

Dibaajimowin 2: Ceremonies and Good Relationships

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Podcast Transcript

Ceremony is what ties together resurgence. It is the “place,” or set of relationships with the spiritual world,¹ from which we learn the teachings that guide our behaviour as Anishinabek. Embodying these teachings in our behaviour when our minds and actions have been dominated by Eurocentric thinking for centuries constitutes a resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin, and forms the basis of our resistance and decolonization.

Seeking out and participating in ceremonies is one of the strongest places from which to decolonize our minds and to build our resistance to colonialism as Anishinabek peoples.

Ceremonies were at the core of my work in Curve Lake First Nation with Gitigaa-Migize. He conducts a variety of ceremonies over the course of the year, which I understand to be a major part of his on-going commitment to living an Anishinabe life, as well as an on-going commitment to providing safe spaces for Anishinabek to live as Anishinabek and to reconnect with Anishinabek teachings that may have been taken from them as a result of colonialism. A key part about ceremony is that it provides a safe space where Anishinabek can just be Anishinabek in the absence of want (Betasamosake 2011, 92-3; 96-98). As Gitigaa-Migize said to me this summer, ceremony is important within a neocolonial context because it is a place where Nishnaabeg can connect to their

¹ Deloria (2001) defines place as “the relationships of things to each other” (23). In other words, place is not made up of inanimate things, but beings that have a personality (22-3), from which we can learn from.

ancestors.² It is also a place where those dealing with the effects of colonialism such as residential schools and the intergenerational-trauma of genocide can go to be filled-up with the good aspects of our culture again, even if only for a short period of time. It is the spiritual connection to our teachings, the land and our ancestors that provides this strengthening.

My work with Gitigaa-Migize within the ceremonial context took on the role of shkaabewis, or helper, where I often helped him conduct both public and private ceremonies. What this means is that I helped Gitigaa-Migize conduct sweats, sunrise ceremonies, cleansing ceremonies as well as opening and closing ceremonies for some local Indigenous organizations. It also meant that Gitigaa-Migize and I were together most of the time, working together either at the ceremonies themselves or driving to and from where the ceremonies would take place. This provided an additional space for conversations about biskaabiiyang and fostered a deepening of our relationship, demonstrating ceremony is not simply what happens *at* ceremony itself, but includes all the preparation and relationships that surround it.

Public ceremonies provided the opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to come together to learn about Nishnaabeg teachings. An example of what I'm calling a public ceremony is a sunrise ceremony, such as the one we held on June 21 during the Ode'min Giizis festival, an annual Indigenous arts and culture festival held in Peterborough, Ontario. The teachings Gitigaa-Migize offered in these settings often

² Gitigaa-Migize. Curve Lake First Nation. 15 June 2011.

focused on how to live well with each other and with the land. Indeed, the occupation of Nishnaabeg lands is physical, ideological as well as spiritual; enforcing Eurocentric ideologies and spirituality on our lands promotes neocolonialism just as much as the physical occupation, but these are linked because the ideology informs the on-going physical domination of lands and Nishnaabeg. Addressing this, ceremonies where non-Nishnaabeg were present focused not so much on co-existence, but rather non-Indigenous participants were given some information to help them live as Nishnaabeg within occupied lands. The ceremonies thus offered those settlers willing to listen the chance to see beyond colonial privilege and neocolonial ideologies; it offered them a chance to decolonize themselves and their relationships with Anishinabewaki.

That said, ceremony is important in a biskaabiiyang context as it provides Nishnaabeg with the opportunity to critically reflect on our experiences under colonialism as well as to find more pieces of knowledge to bring into our daily lives. The teachings offered form the centre, but around that centre stand the people, engaging in relationships with each other. A good example of a teaching that helps us to live well, or to decolonize, is that of mino-bimaadiziwin, which translates to living the good life, and/or continuous rebirth (Betasamosake 2008b, 32; LaDuke 2009, xiv). Mino-bimaadiziwin is intent on maintaining good relationships with each other; in a neocolonial context where our relationships with each other, the land and with our teachings have been attacked by priests, bureaucrats, settlers and resource developers, reconnecting those relationships is a form of resurgence, as it is within those relationships that we are able to share our experiences and to learn how to address the fallout from colonialism from others who

have the stories to tell. It is through ceremony and experience that we come to deeper understandings of mino-bimaadiziwin as we see ourselves, and therefore our responsibilities, within it.

The ceremonies we conducted this summer supported such reconnection between people and between people and Nishnaabeg teachings. For example, Gitigaa-Migize led a number of sweats that brought people together for more than a half a day at a time to just *be* Anishinabe. This was a place where people were able to speak from the heart about the challenges they face in their lives as a people oppressed within their own lands. The sweat lodge is a healing space, where teachings are shared and where the teachings can help guide us. Its also a place of fortification: when we leave the lodge, we feel good about being Anishinabek, left stronger for when we go out into the world where simply being Anishinabek is criminalized. The sweat lodge shows us that colonialism is not okay: when we leave the lodge we know that the healing and teachings we received there come with the purpose to fight against our erasure. By embodying those teachings we become stronger, and better able to fight colonialism and its manifestation from a position of cultural strength instead of shame.

Embodying the teachings from ceremony is a lifelong process, and one that cannot be fully explained in this short podcast. However, I can draw a personal example to illustrate the resurgence imbued within ceremony. Gitigaa-Migize gave me a name at a ceremony at his house in June.³ The name I received is Zoong'de, which translates as

³ I had asked Gitigaa-Migize to help in my naming in the summer of 2010.

strong heart. In receiving this name, part of my responsibility is to understand it within the context of my life, to embody its teachings. A major part of my life is decolonizing my mind and my actions, and thus the teachings embedded in Zoong'de provide me with a life's worth of work to understand what it means to live with a strong heart in a colonized context. For example, drawing on Gitigaa-Migize's knowledge of the Seven Grandmother Teachings, Betasamosake (2011) notes that the word Aakde'yn translates in a similar way as Zoong'de. Aakde'yn means

"strong hearted," not in a physical sense, but in relation to Debwewin [or heart knowledge]. Aakde'yn might be used to describe the weakest person physically, but this kind of strength comes from knowing who one is, a grounding in self-knowledge. ... Because of this knowledge, one who has Aakde'yn is without fear of a foe or the unknown, *because he or she is confident in who he or she is and where he or she is going [which is experienced] within the context of tremendous humility* (125).

The name I received thus comes with the responsibility to embody its teachings within my actions. It is one of the springs from which resurgence flows within my life.

This resurgence gives me a stronger base to face colonial attacks that come with living as Anishinabe, instead of acting out of the feelings of shame put on me by settler society (Betasamosake 2011, 13-16). Indeed, such teachings emerge in me through the embodiment of the meanings behind my name. In other words, the process of embodying the teachings behind my name means asking Anishinabe-inaadiziwin and Anishinabe-gikendaasowin to guide my actions, especially when I'm in conflict. It does not preclude resistance, but rather ensures my resistance is

guided by biskaabiiyang and not shame or a Eurocentric ideological framework that ultimately does not contest the foundations of colonialism. The more I understand and live those teachings within my name, the stronger the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin within my actions becomes.

This is one of many metaphors for the importance ceremony has for resurgence. At the core, ceremony gives us the teachings and opportunities to embody as Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. This resurgence strengthens our resistance, as embodying Anishinabe-inaadiziwin helps us to address colonial problems with Anishinabek solutions.

Analysis: Relationship and Ceremony: Knowledges for Resurgence

Our resistance to colonialism is fortified by knowing who we are as Anishinabek. Continuously deepening this self-knowledge allows us to root our lives and our resistances in the teachings that sustain our identities as Anishinabek peoples in Anishinabewaki (e.g. Deloria 1994, 277). Relationships and ceremonies are key to this resurgence of knowing who we are because it is through relationship that knowledge is revealed, while ceremony helps to orient and ground that knowledge and is itself a way through which knowledge is given to us (Frank D. qtd. in Garrouette 2003, 128). Within a colonial context, relationship and ceremony provide the unstoppable gift of knowledge that ties us to the ecologies from which we come: they are channels through which that knowledge flows. This resurgence of knowing thus supports our resistance by helping us reclaim and maintain Anishinabek identities because, simply, this knowledge helps us to know who we are. This analysis thus explores the re-emergence Anishinabe-gikendaasowin - the knowledge and knowledge traditions of Anishinabek (Geniusz 2009, 9) - through relationship and ceremony as part of the decolonizing biskaabiiyang framework.

Knowing who we are while still in a colonial context represents an act of resistance unto its own. Colonialism attempts to erase Anishinabek as part of the settler state's project of asserting sovereignty over our territories. This erasure, manifesting in residential schools, the creation of the "Aboriginal" category of a "multicultural" Canada, and in a multitude of other arenas, functions to make it easier for settler society to access Anishinabe lands and "resources;" indeed, the thinking goes, if there are no Anishinabek, then what once was Anishinabek land

must obviously be available for settlement or development. Knowing one's self as an Anishinabe person thus constitutes a type of resistance. *Deepening* that knowledge represents a resurgence of Anishinabe identity where it otherwise continues to be a target for erasure.

Knowledge of who we are comes from our relationships. We engage in a relationship with the land that results in knowing how to live in balance with the ecologies we belong to (Henderson 2006, 144-53). Whereas a main focus of the Anishinabe teaching of mino-bimaadiziwin is to promote balance within our relationships and within the land, maintaining balance results in knowledge because the ecology of the world is in constant flux, and knowing how to live within the flux generates the knowledge to do so (153). Knowing how to live well within a specific place, then, results in an identity, because each place has its own identity manifesting in the constant flux. The way I understand it, our identities as Anishinabek are the expressions of our lands, the knowledges that arise from our lands, and our relationships to other people and to our territories.

While the knowledge needed to live well within our territories comes from the relationships we hold with them, the relationships we hold with knowledge holders also provide a way for us to access the knowledge we need to live as Anishinabek in a colonial context. This is not to say that our Elder have been completely untouched by colonialism, as all of us have been affected in one way or another by over 400 years of colonial occupation and domination. However, part of a biskaabiiyang decolonization process of picking up pieces of Anishinabe-

gikendaasowin requires that we seek those pieces of knowledge within our Elders as well as through other means.⁴

During this project, one of the ways knowledge resurged was through my relationship with Gitigaa-Migize. As mentioned in the introductory portion of this blog site (i.e. see Coming Home through Active Presence - Project Introduction), I worked with Gitigaa-Migize as his shkaabewis, or helper. This meant I was given responsibilities to help with a variety of things, including helping him to open/close talking circles of various types, supporting him during ceremonies at Kinoomaagewaapkong,⁵ and learning about the medicines he uses during such events, among other responsibilities. New knowledge about these things was shared with me each time we did a ceremony, opened the medicine bundles, etc.

What is key here is that the resurgence of knowledge is a personal process as well as a communal one: I must take the knowledge given to me through my relationship with Gitigaa-Migize and others, and apply it within my own life (Henderson 2006, 131). This embodiment of knowledge results in a confidence regarding what it means to live as Anishinabe, as was noted by Waaseya'sin about the children who help with the maple syrup harvest at Gitigaa-Migize's house:

Those kids, they walk around like they know everything, but its a humble 'I know everything', and 'I'm confident', and 'I can do this next year'. You know, I see [child's name] talk about, he was talking to us about different plants yesterday, and he did it with such authority, right. But he's confident

⁴ Such as dreams, being on the lands, etc.

⁵ Also known as "The Petroglyphs" at which is currently known as Petroglyphs Provincial Park.

in himself; he knows what he knows. And the same with [the other children]. That's what's happening here; those kids said 'next year, we're going to be able to do this sugar bush', right.⁶

While many peoples harvest maple syrup, key here is the notion that knowledge fills people up, giving them confidence in their identity as Anishinabek. They see themselves in the the work and in the knowledge, instead of being told that both the knowledge, work and their very identity has little value.

Seeing one's self in Anishinabe knowledge is a form of resurgence and renewal, and is oriented and grounded within ceremony. Indeed, ceremony helps to orient ourselves within our knowledge systems because it roots us in our "continuing relationships with high spiritual powers so that each bit of information is specific to the time, place, and circumstances of the people" (Deloria 1994, 277). Like the children in Waaseya'sin's example above see themselves in the work of harvesting maple syrup, thereby increasing their confidence in doing that work, ceremony allows us to see ourselves and the knowledge we hold within the teachings that originate from our relationship with the land. This knowledge helps to shape our identity (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 41-2), and helps to shape our resistance to colonialism because it roots us in our intellectual traditions and relationships to land. When we see ourselves in the teachings and the land, we become stronger when fighting neocolonialism because we are not as easily undermined by forces of co-optation designed to topple Anishinabe resistance.

⁶ Waaseya'sin. Curve Lake First Nation. 17 June 2011.

Basing our resistance in the teachings and knowledge that we understand through ceremony and through trying to embody it in our lives provides an unstoppable flow of knowledge. This knowledge can be brought into our resistances to colonialism through their resurgence, meaning that the deeper we immerse ourselves within them, the more our knowledges will inform our behaviour. It is through ceremony that I am able to see myself within our resistance and resurgence, as ceremony is itself an act of renewing, rebalancing and maintaining relationships within the web of life that supports us and which I support in turn; speaking in the sweat lodge or listening to the teachings at a sunrise ceremony, for example, helps me to see myself fitting into a (re)balanced world, or a world without colonialism. We must vision the world we want to live in, and then work towards manifesting that it.